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# Coronavirus & Assembling For Worship

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This is March 27, 2020 as I record this presentation. The United States is in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Various laws are being enacted throughout the states—each differing from the others.

- In Michigan and Arkansas churches are exempt from the laws which state no more than 10 people may be gathered together.
- In Texas and Oklahoma churches are not exempt.

Brethren are having meetings in various places to decide whether to have a worship assembly on this coming Sunday and, as far as it goes, they are deciding whether to shut the church services down for several weeks until the government says it is permissible once again to assemble for worship.

Here are some of the things I have been hearing:

- 1) This is not a persecution against the church and therefore should not be approached as a persecution.
- 2) This is a very dangerous virus and we should suspend church services for the time being until this virus has abated.
- 3) For those insisting on worship, the popular idea is: Let's meet in small groups in each other's homes and when this is all over we will get back together as one congregation once again.

So, let me say a word about each of these questions.

## **Is This A Persecution?**

Let's address the issue of persecution. The popular mantra being repeated is: "*This is not a persecution against the church and we should not view it as such.*"

The idea here is that: Since this is not a persecution against the church, the church should not feel obligated to meet for worship regardless of the consequences.

Here is my response: **This is not a persecution yet, but it can and probably will soon turn into a persecution.**

In the first century Rome made a law to protect it's empire. Parthians and others were threatening the empire's existence. To protect itself, Roman authorities went from city to city with a statute of Caesar. They set up Caesar's statute requiring all people to stand in front of the statute and burn a pinch of incense to the statute to prove each citizen's loyalty to the empire.

When this law was made, it was not made to specifically target the church or Christians. It was made to protect the empire from enemies. Yet even though it was not made to target Christians, the church found itself having to make a decision: *The state made a law which was diametrically opposed to God's law.*

- When God commands one thing,
- And the state makes a law diametrically opposed to God's law,
- Then Christians must make a decision: Shall we obey God or men.

### **Acts 5:29**

<sup>29</sup> But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men."

When brethren decide to obey God rather than men, that's when the persecution will begin. Government officials do not like it when citizens think there is an authority greater than the government.

When the coronavirus laws against assembling were made, some say these laws were not made to persecute the church. They say the church is not being singled out. Therefore, we should not view this as a persecution against the church.

I will agree to this extent: There is no persecution yet. But the moment a church tells the government officials that there is an authority greater than them, an authority which overrules what the government says, then the persecution will begin.

It does not matter that the government is trying to "help" us. I'll talk about the health issue in just a moment. Please bear with me.

The present laws concerning social distancing because of coronavirus have led local and state governments to make laws which say: No assemblies of more than 10 people are allowed. The state of Oklahoma has allowed businesses offering "essential services" to stay open, but they still advise that customers going inside these businesses to keep a safe distance between themselves. What are some of the essential businesses allowed to stay open in Oklahoma?

- Hotels
- Grocery stores
- Pharmacies
- Gas stations
- Public and private golf courses
- Convenience stores
- Hardware stores, farm stores and garden centers
- Liquor stores<sup>1</sup>

This list is not exhaustive, but think about what's on this list. Golf courses and liquor stores are essential—but churches gathering for worship are not essential.

This depresses me when I think our nation has reached the point where liquor stores and golf courses are considered essential and churches gathering for worship are not.

Here's what we have:

- On the one hand God commands that the church assembles on the first day of every week to break the bread and remember the Lord who died for our sins (Acts 20:7).
- On the other hand the government commands that the church must not assemble for a month or two or three or four.

What shall we do brethren? Shall we obey God or men?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://oklahoman.com/article/5658579/coronavirus-in-oklahoma-what-businesses-are-essential>; 3/27/20.

If you look carefully at the passages which require assembling (Heb 10:25; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 14:1-40; 16:1-2), you will discover that:

- God never said: Assemble only if it's safe.
- God never said: Don't assemble if you might get sick.

No, God said to assemble. If the government says don't assemble, but God says assemble what should we do? We should obey God rather than men.

I hope your congregation will decide to assemble on the Lord's day—because that's the right thing to do. I am going to assemble with the congregation I normally assemble with on the Lord's day.

## **Getting Sick**

Now, let's talk about the danger of this coronavirus.

I do not want to minimize the danger of the coronavirus. I do not wish it upon anyone. I do not want anyone to die. I do think we need to keep things in perspective.

This is March 27, 2020. The time is 10:00 pm in Oklahoma. As of this moment there are 104,000 cases of coronavirus and 1,700 people have died.<sup>2</sup> We are not done with this yet. More will die before I'm finished recording this message.

However: "*According to CDC, this year's flu season has led to at least 17 million medical visits and 390,000 hospitalizations. ... [The] CDC in its latest report estimated that there had been at least 23,000 deaths related to the flu as of March 14.*"<sup>3</sup>

If the church shuts down its services every flu season because people might get sick or might make others sick, then about four or five months each year, the church will shut down and not meet at all.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/us/>; 3/27/20 @ 9:55 pm. The exact numbers are 104,142 cases and 1,696 deaths.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.advisory.com/daily-briefing/2020/03/24/flu-update>; 3/27/20 @ 9:59 pm.

Did God know what He was doing when He commanded His church to assemble? Did He not realize that during flu season it was dangerous to meet together? Why did He require an assembly at all? (I'm asking these questions tongue-in-cheek.)

One church leader whom I love and respect said this to me: "*Everything God requires is logical and makes sense.*" I think the point this brother was trying to make is:

- Since everything God requires is logical and makes sense,
- And since meeting together during a virus pandemic doesn't make sense,
- Therefore the church should not assemble together at this time.

(Perhaps I was misunderstanding this brother—I hope am not misrepresenting him. His identity will forever be hidden, so do not ask his name if you should ever meet me in person.)

But is this true? Does everything God requires make logical sense?

- In Exodus 12 God told Israel to stay in their homes on passover night and smear blood around their doors to keep a death angel out during the night—is this logical and reasonable?

Things that are logical and reasonable are things you can figure out with logic and reason. Could the Israelites have used logic and reason to figure out on their own that they needed to stay indoors on passover night with blood smeared on the door? Or did Israel need special revelation from God to know what to do?

- In 2 Samuel 5:23-24 God told David circle behind the Philistines and wait till he hear the "sound of marching in the tops of the mulberry trees." At that moment, David was to go forth and fight against the Philistines. Is this logical and reasonable?

Could David have figured this out with logic and reasoning, or did he need special revelation to know this?

- In Mark 16:16 Jesus said if men want to be saved they must be baptized. Is this logical and reasonable?

Could sinners today figure out they need to be baptized to be saved by just sitting around using their logic and reasoning abilities, or do they need special revelation from God?

My point is: Very often the requirements of God are neither logical nor reasonable.

- Jesus told a rich man to sell all that he has and give it all away to the poor (Mt 19:21). Does that sound reasonable?
- Jesus said to be faithful—even if it means dying (Rev 2:10). Does that sound reasonable?

I'll stop here. I've proven my point.

We must do what God says even if it seems unreasonable and illogical. We do what God says just because He said so—and for no other reason.

One Christian said to me: *"If we aren't careful, when this is over, there won't be a church to go back to when the virus ends—because all the church members will be dead, because they assembled, got coronavirus, and died because of it."*

I take this to mean: To protect the church from dying out, we must stop assembling for worship for the time being.

I'm scratching my head trying to figure that one out.

- Daniel prophesied that the Lord's kingdom, the church, would stand forever (Dan 2:44).
- Jesus said the "gates of hell would not prevail against the church" (Mt 16:18).

Now I'm hearing people say the only hope the church has is to stop assembling to worship God. Something is wrong with this picture.

Please, consider the issue of assembling and the danger of getting sick with coronavirus because we assembled. Should we therefore not assemble?

My friends, this is the reason men introduced individual communion cups into the Lord's supper. Men were afraid of drinking from one common cup. "We'll all get sick," they said. "We could actually die," they said. And because of the possibility of getting sick and because we might possibly die, individual communion cups were brought into the worship of the church.

- Were individual cups brought in because that's what the Bible teaches? No.
- They were brought in strictly and solely because of sanitation.

Since 1973, when I first learned of the churches of Christ who used one communion cup, I have heard brethren say over and over again:

*"God will take care of us if we use one cup; but even if we get sick, we still should use one cup because that's what Jesus commanded in 1 Cor 11:23-25."*

For some reason, this reasoning does not apply to the assembly and coronavirus. For some reason, very few are saying, *"God will take care of us if we assemble like He told us to; but even if we get sick, we still should assemble because that's what Jesus commanded in Acts 20:7."*

Where is our faith brothers and sisters? Shall we have enough faith to trust that God will protect us using one common cup, but have no faith that He will protect us for assembling? If assembling right now is too dangerous and we are privileged to ignore the command to assemble, may we use the same reasoning and bring individual communion cups into the assembly—when we start assembling again after coronavirus?

Brothers and sisters, I implore you to trust in God and assemble.

- Practice social distancing in the assembly if you wish, but don't refuse to assemble.
- Wash your hands often, and don't shake my hand if you're afraid, but don't refuse to assemble.
- Wear a face mask if it will make you feel better, but don't refuse to assemble.

Neither elders nor gospel preachers have the right to say: "Churches should no longer meet together for worship for the next three weeks ... or for the next three months." God did not give church leaders the authority to suspend the Lord's day worship assembly.

**Q:** What about when there's an ice storm? Don't we all believe that when an ice storm comes, it's scriptural to suspend services because it's too dangerous to assemble under these conditions?

**A:** Yes. This is true. The scriptures which would probably support this thinking would be: Mt 12:7 and 2 Cor 8:12.

But the question we need to be asking is this: Where is the scripture that justifies the church from suspending worship to God because healthy people might get sick if they come and worship God in an assembly?

Look, I'm concerned about catching coronavirus just like everyone else, but the church cannot suspend its services every year when flu season comes around. Remember: 23,000 people have

died in the United States as of March 14 because of the flu—and the flu season is not over yet.

**Q:** What's driving brethren to decide they should suspend services?

**A:** I believe the real reason is fear of the government—fear of persecution (which many are denying exists—they're saying, "This is not a persecution against the church," and yet they're afraid of the government).

Let me explain why I'm saying this.

On the dates of February 2, 9, 16, and 23, all our brethren had assemblies—yet they knew about coronavirus. On the dates of March 1, 8, 15 and 22 all our churches had assemblies—yet they all knew about coronavirus. Some churches, on March 22, received a warning from city code enforcers. They were warned they were in violation of the city ordinance against churches assembling. Now, in this new week with new city ordinances and new state laws, brethren are meeting together and deciding this coronavirus is so dangerous we better not assemble on March 29.

Ask: What has changed? Has coronavirus become more dangerous this week than it was last Sunday? No. I believe the real, underlying reason brethren are fearing an assembly is because of the possibility of being persecuted—yet they say, "*This is not a persecution against the church.*"

- If it's not because of fear of persecution,
- But rather fear of getting sick,
- They why did they meet last Sunday?
- Why are they bringing up warning citations from the local code enforcers if the possibility of persecution has nothing to do with the decision to suspend services?

Here's another question: What if the governor of Oklahoma or the governor of Texas changes the law next Wednesday? What if these governors say, "Churches are now exempt. It's okay for churches to meet"? Will all our churches in Oklahoma and Texas start having services again? If so, the problem never (really) was the dangers of getting sick. The problem really is the fear of reprisal.



## **Small Home-Assemblies**

There are some brethren who know the church should assemble on the Lord's day—and they want to assemble, but they are afraid for the entire church to assemble together. Therefore, they have decided that the church should divide into small groups and meet in people's homes for the time being. Each little segment of the church will meet in private homes and worship and observe the Lord's supper and then, when coronavirus is over, the church will reassemble and be one again.

The question I'm asking is this: What's the difference between this proposal and Bible classes?

For years I have heard Brother Ronny Wade debate with Sunday school churches about the unscriptural nature of Sunday school. I myself have had two debates with digressive brethren about the unscripturalness of Sunday school. Simply put: When the church gathers for worship, all the members of the congregation are required to be in one, undivided assembly. Here are the scriptures:

### **Acts 20:7**

<sup>7</sup> Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.

This was the church at Troas. They all came together into one assembly to break the bread. They did not divide into little groups to do this. They came together and stayed together to break the bread.

### **1 Corinthians 11:33**

<sup>33</sup> Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

This was written to the church at Corinth. To eat the Lord's supper, the entire congregation was required to come together and stay together to eat the Lord's supper.

### **1 Corinthians 14:23-24**

<sup>23</sup> Therefore if **the whole church comes together in one place**, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

<sup>24</sup> But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all.

This passage explicitly states that the whole church is required to "*come together into one place.*" After making this statement, instructions were given on how to conduct the assembly.

- All the men could speak, but they must speak one at a time (vv27-31).
- The women were to remain silent in the assembly (vv34-35).
- All assemblies conducted by the church are to be conducted by these rules (v26).

If brethren decide to divide up and begin meeting in private homes, then they should view this as a permanent arrangement—as if they are now beginning a brand new congregation which will meet from this day forward, choose elders in the new church, and worship according to scripture. This new congregation will have its own gospel meetings and will be autonomous—self-sufficient and will not be considered part of a "mother church" to which they answer and to which they will one day merge when coronavirus is over.

Dividing a church into small groups for worship in private homes only to come back together when this is all over is unscriptural.

## **What Options Do We Have?**

**Q:** What can churches do?

There are several options:

### **1) Meet like normal on Sunday.**

If elderly people are afraid of coming and getting sick, let them stay away. If young mothers with little children are afraid, let them stay away. Let it be between them and God. But for brethren and sisters who have a conscience, let not the leaders of the church cancel the God-ordained, God-required assembly of the church (Acts 20:7).



Therefore: Let all the families come to the parking lot of the church building and set up lawn chairs. Let one family of 5 sit in a small group together. Let the next family sit 10 feet away (the legal requirement is 6 feet) in their group of 6, and so forth. Let them form a circle made up of small groups of 5 and 6 in each group. If the code enforcers come explain you are not violating their code:

- There are not more than 10 in each group.
- Each group is 10 feet from all other groups.
- Everyone is out in the open air.
- The local and state codes are being observed. What's the problem?

This is option #3.

I have now given three possibilities which I hope will be useable by brethren during this stressful time.

## Russia

In closing, I want to tell you that I am fully aware of the stress of the church assembling against the orders of the state.

My family and I lived in Tula, Russia for 2 years (1997-1999). The entire time we lived there it was illegal for an unregistered church to meet together and perform "religious acts." By religious acts the government meant: (a) communion and (b) baptism.

The entire time we lived in Russia we never "forsook the assembly" (Heb 10:25). We met together with the church every single Sunday. We met in secret—sort of. What I mean is: The local department of the KGB knew we were meeting together and for the most part they would leave us alone. We met behind a 7-foot privacy, wooden fence and behind locked doors.

Occasionally the KGB would come by to threaten us and intimidate us. Their purpose was to scare us and hopefully convince us that "*it wasn't worth it, we should just quit.*" I will say this:

- The intimidation worked—they certainly frightened us.

- We did not stop assembling together.

Our brothers and sisters in Russia meet together under extremely harsh conditions, but they continue to meet and assemble every Lord's day. If they can do this in Russia, surely we can do so in America.

Let us pray for our Russian brothers and sisters to be strong and find some relief. Let us pray for ourselves to be faithful here in America. Let us choose to do what God commanded and not leave off the assembly of the church. May we remember the name we wear: The Church of Christ. Let us act like the name we wear. God bless the brotherhood.